

We Must Not Kill Gazan Children to Try to Protect Israel's Children

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The crisis in the Middle East is a knotty test of our humanity, asking how to respond to a grotesque provocation for which there is no good remedy. And in this test, we in the West are not doing well.

The acceptance of large-scale bombing of Gaza and of a ground invasion likely to begin soon suggests that Palestinian children are lesser victims, devalued by their association with Hamas and its history of terrorism. Consider that more than [1,500 children](#) in Gaza have been killed, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health, and around one-third of Gaza homes have been destroyed or damaged in just two weeks — and this is merely the softening-up before what is expected to be a much bloodier ground invasion.

I've flown into beautiful, sun-washed Tel Aviv, where the graffiti reads "Destroy Hamas." Israelis have been shattered by the Hamas terrorism and kidnappings, an attack that felt existential and explains the determination to dismantle Hamas, whatever the cost. The anxiety in Tel Aviv is palpable, peaceful though it seems, while Gaza is an inner ring of hell and probably on a path to something much worse.

The United States speaks a good deal about principles, but I fear that President Biden has embedded a hierarchy of human life in official American policy. He expressed outrage at the massacres of Jews by Hamas, as he should have, but he has struggled to be equally clear about valuing Gazan lives. And it's not always evident whether he is standing four-square with Israel as a country or with its failed prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, a longtime obstacle to peace.

What are we to make of the Biden administration's call for an additional [\\$14 billion](#) in assistance for Israel and simultaneous call for humanitarian aid for Gazans? Defensive weapons for Israel's Iron Dome system would make sense, but in practice, is the idea that we will help pay for humanitarians to mop up the blood caused in part by our weapons?

What are we to tell Dr. Iyad Abu Karsh, a Gaza physician who [lost his wife and son](#) in a bombing and then had to treat his injured 2-year-old daughter? He didn't even have time to care for his niece or sister, for he had to deal with the bodies of his loved ones.

"I have no time to talk now," he told a Times colleague, his voice trembling over the phone. "I want to go bury them."

In his speech on Thursday, Biden called for America to stand firmly behind Ukraine and Israel, two nations attacked by forces aiming to destroy them. Fair enough. But suppose Ukraine responded to Russian war crimes by laying siege to a Russian city, bombing it into dust and cutting off water and electricity while killing thousands and obliging doctors to operate on patients without anesthetic.

I doubt we Americans would shrug and say: *Well, Putin started it. Too bad about those Russian children, but they should have chosen somewhere else to be born.*

Here in Israel, because the Hamas attacks were so brutal and fit into a history of pogroms and Holocaust, they led to a resolve to wipe out Hamas even if this means a large human toll. “Gaza will become a place where no human being can exist,” [declared](#) Giora Eiland, a former head of the Israeli National Security Council. “There is no other option for ensuring the security of the State of Israel.”

I think that view reflects a practical and moral miscalculation. While I would love to see the end of Hamas, it’s not feasible to eliminate radicalism in Gaza, and a ground invasion is more likely to feed extremism than to squelch it — at an unbearable cost in civilian lives.

I particularly want to challenge the suggestion, more implicit than explicit, that Gazan lives matter less because many Palestinians sympathize with Hamas. People do not lose their right to life because they have odious views, and in any case, almost half of Gazans are children. Those kids in Gaza, infants included, are among the more than two million people enduring a siege and collective punishment.

Israel has suffered a horrifying terrorist attack and deserves the world’s sympathy and support, but it should not get a blank check to slaughter civilians or to deprive them of food, water and medicine. Bravo to Biden for trying to negotiate some humanitarian access to Gaza, but the challenge will be not just getting aid into Gaza but also distributing it to where it’s needed.

A prolonged ground invasion seems to me a particularly risky course, likely to kill large numbers of Israeli soldiers, hostages and especially Gazan civilians. We are better than that, and Israel is better than that. Leveling cities is what the Syrian government did in Aleppo or Russia did in Grozny; it should not be an American-backed undertaking by Israel in Gaza.

The best answer to this test is to try even in the face of provocation to cling to our values. That means that despite our biases, we try to uphold all lives as having equal value. If your ethics see some children as invaluable and others as disposable, that’s not moral clarity but moral myopia. We must not kill Gazan children to try to protect Israeli children.